

Saved in Hiding

By Myriam Abramowicz

This presentation is a composite of three talks I gave in September 1994 (Yom Kippur 5755), October 1997 (Yom Kippur 5758), and October 2006 (Yom Kippur 5767)

In 1976, I met Madame Nana Ruyts, by then widowed from Oscar Ruyts, who had taken in my parents, Mendel and Leah, and hidden them during the Nazi occupation of Belgium. Hiding under the name of Abeloos, my parents remained with the Ruytses from 1942 until the end of the war.

That meeting with Madame Ruyts changed my life—from comfort to a nomadic existence. I realized as I watched her make tea, her back bent over the tray she was preparing for us, that by the grace of this woman I am alive today. And that realization led me, nearly one-half century later, to finding traces of other lives torn by the war years and reuniting them.



My father, Mendel, in Palestine (top) 1922 and in desert (bottom), Seder 1923.

Everywhere the occupation took place some Jews were hidden by non-Jews—even in Germany under Hitler's gaze. While most during those years stood by, silent, eyes and ears closed to the events that took their neighbors away to certain death and extermination, others, in the midst of the horror, opened their homes and took us in. They stood with us, brave and defiant, risking their lives in order to save ours.

Oskar and Nana Ruyts did more than most. This remarkably courageous couple hid not just my parents. They closed their dry-goods store, emptied the shelves, and hid 23 Jews there.

I wanted to know what it was that made these people take on such a risk, beyond the ones they were already under. I wanted to ask Madame Ruyts, and others like her: What made you take us in during the *Shoah*? For without them, I would not be here today.

After the war ended in 1945, my parents came out of hiding, but that wasn't the end of their story. I was born one year later and grew up hearing the stories of the war—we called them *Les histoires de pendant la guerre*.

Some, of course, could not speak and remain silent till this day. They wanted to forget, to forge new lives, sometimes to erase completely the pain or horror their eyes and hearts had witnessed. But other, like my mother, were able to tell us about the war years, the years in hiding.

We heard the words: "Before the War" and "After the War," their "Once Upon a Time" as a prelude, two sets of brackets as a rite of passage into the Netherworld. Every once in a while the version would detour and then return once again to the familiar parts. Going backward in order to go forward. And sometimes they would be told along with old photographs, putting faces to the names. I would come to know these stories by heart.

I heard about the millions who were murdered, the near annihilation of one entire people and the well-oiled machinery that promised to secure the death of so many more. But I also heard another truth: that there were those who risked their lives to save my parents, to ensure our lives. That there were some who thwarted the plans of those who were determined that none of us would be here today.

I inherited that legacy and that truth. I became living proof of the ones who stood with us, defiant, and without whom we would not exist. And so, in 1976, I went to meet Madame Ruyts. And in the years to follow, I was to take my mother's words and mold them into large black-and-white images (*Editorial Note: conceived and directed in 1980, the documentary film As If It Were Yesterday/Comme Si C'était Hier*). I searched for and found non-Jews who, like the Ruytses, had rescued Jews by hiding them at enormous risk to themselves. I interviewed and filmed them, recording their words and stories, hoping to impart the truth of their existence to posterity.

But my mother recounted yet another story, one that echoed a Torah story we know well, about a woman named Yoheved, who placed her small infant son in a basket; placed it on the



My mother, Leah, visiting my brother while in hiding in Belgium , 1942-43.

water and watched from behind the bullrushes as Pharaoh's daughter took the child and raised him. The Midrash named her Badia and she named the child Moshe—from the water. Each time the Torah pronounces the name Moshe, it implicitly honors the action of Badia—until this day.



My brother, George, flanked by my aunt Golda (left) and our mother in Brussels taken by street photographer, 1944.

Imagine the courage of a mother to choose life for her child—at the risk of losing sight of him. Imagine the humanity of a daughter of the enemy willing to save a life decreed for death.

And so I learned that in 1942, several days after Yom Kippur, as the pattern of sinister anti-Jewish laws swelled throughout the land, my parents had a son while in hiding in Brussels. They watched from behind a clinic wall as their newborn infant was handed to a Christian attendant and vanished. In an instant, the child my mother had carried in her womb for nine months was gone. My parents walked out of the clinic, empty-handed, with only a fragment of hope that one day they would see their boy again.

When the war came to an end, my parents sought to find their child, hidden in a nearby clinic, and start again.

My parents found their George, my older brother, but he was damaged and wounded by the separation during his infant years. There was no way for them to comprehend the condition of the child they found. So much had been gained, yet so much was lost.

So a decade after my reunion with Madame Ruyts, my mother's words would once again prompt me, urging me to go further. "Gather these hidden children," she said, "bring them all together so that they would know one another. I'll cook."

She was to be the spark behind a worldwide movement known as *The Hidden Child*. This small, humble woman was to set a table huge enough to gather 2,000 formerly hidden children. Inspired by her, I reached out to them and organized the First International Reunion of the Hidden Child, which met in NYC in May 1991. This later grew into the Hidden Child Foundation, now under the aegis of the Anti-Defamation League.

My mother altered the course of their lives, gave them another door through which to walk. Their tears were to flow upon hearing words that helped fill in the blanks. These hidden children would tell one another what no one had ever heard before and in the years to follow they would write, make films, and replace the flames and ashes with new memories.

For many of these adults, once children hidden during the *Shoah*, this event marked their rite of passage, giving them a status, giving them an option—whether silently or aloud—to explore the dark corners of *their* experience.

Those children who were lucky enough to find a hiding place with gentile families, throughout occupied Europe, lived the war years precariously. Depending on their age when they stepped into this new family, they experienced the absence of their parents differently.

If they were teens, they often had vivid memories. They deeply felt the loss of their own parents, the loss of the very notion of familiarity and safety that was represented by a home, a street, a school, Shabbat, a *simhah*. If they were little ones, they would not know the people who feverishly sought to reclaim them.



My father, middle, with brother Henri (deported to Auschwitz) and sister Golda, in front of their kosher restaurant in Ostende, Belgium.

For some, finding their Jewish parents after years of separation brought new anguish. The complex "trauma of the Hidden Child" was to be passed on to their children and is found in the suffering of the Second Generation. They saw their parents as interrupting the imposed interruption, usurpers of their new lives. Though reunited, so often these children remained separated from their parents, unable to embrace them fully and invent a new existence, a new identity. They found themselves in a new place claimed by parents who had been forced to live the unimaginable.

Surely these parents and all who managed to survive wanted to live. In trying to forget, they thought they would find calm. For my parents, once they were returned to safety, their feverish passions flourished and filled our lives—my mother's for Pushkin and Tchaikovsky, Renoir and Cézanne, and my father's for Shalom Aleichem and Rav Kook, Koussevitsky and "mama lashon."

We who are the children of the remnant became the children of renewed hope and the guarantors of the future. Our parents wanted for us what was interrupted for them. They

watched as we wove new garments out of their threadbare rags. We represented living proof that they had come through the disarray and crossed over to a new life “After the War.” We personified the investment they made toward a new beginning. We, who weren't even

supposed to be here.



My father, going to the First Congress in Basel 1946, right after the end of WWII

Along with placing their hopes and dreams on us, they rested on us. We would become the translators and the interpreters of their silent sighs. We carried the names of those with no tombstones. So often we became the children of their nightmares, haunted by their shattered dreams. There were corners left obscure, still in hiding after all these years.

As in my case, the stories they told shaped us and wounded. We recognized our own scars, those handed down to us by the weight of their silence or their revelations. And both made us thirsty for the truth—no matter how dark.

Will those scars never disappear? Perhaps this is where Hitler (*imar shemo may his name be erased*) accomplished his dirty work—not in breaking the Jewish Spirit or even erasing our presence in the world, as he had intended, but in reaching in deep and scarring the familial fibers that once made us whole.

I owe both my parents so much. So much of who I am today carries their imprint. But my parents' generation will soon disappear. What do we—the living remnant that is still here—do with their legacy that will make a difference? What did they want us to learn?

In part, our responsibility is to tell their story, our story, our history. And I say it is being who we are intended to be. Let us regard being Jewish as a badge of honor, a privilege, a choice. Let us remember who we are, where we came from and who sent us here, thus paying homage to their memory and to the notion that we cannot know where we are going if we do not know where we have been.

Myriam Abramowicz, a BJ member since 1988, is a documentary film maker and activist. She is a Gabbai during the Yamim Noarim, organizes the annual Yom Ha'Shoah commemoration and the Eileh Ezkerah speakers, and, has inspired or undertaken numerous projects for BJ over the years.